HOW KATE CLAXTON BECAME FAMOUS

BY FRANKLIN FYLES.

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WILL you younger readers permit me a more reminiscent letter than I usually write? Ah, yes, I know that you who have lived a quarter of a century, or less, get inattentive as soon as a man who has lived half a century, or more, begins to tell about things he saw when he was young. But we have this week a reproduction of "The Two Orphans" with a company which bravely, boldly, brazenly challenges comparison with the one which gave the American introduction of that melodrama twenty-nine years ago. So what can an oldish fellow do but look backward?

"My goodness, but it doesn't seem so long," I said to a survivor of the original cast, who was in the audience at this revival, "since I saw you give a performance which insured you an income for life. Mrs. Stevenson," I said—for Kate Claxton is still the wife of Charles Stevenson, although she has of late years declined to live with him—"I don't mean your first appearance at the Union Square theatre as the blind orphan, but that later one in a Brooklyn cafe." She looked at me inquiringly. "On the night that the Brooklyn theatre burned," I explained, "the first editions of the New York morning newspapers contained accounts of the fire with no intimation of the loss of 200 lives. When word was received in the offices—not by 'phone, as there was none—that few of the people in the gallery had got out, all the reporters available were hustled across the river—not by trolley car and bridge, as there was neither—and I was one of the young fellows who went over by ferry, ran a mile up the steep street and arrived breathing hard at the place of the disaster. Several of us found you in the back room of a saloon where you had taken refuge. You still wore the tattered gown of the beggar, Louise, and in her manner you were shivering with fright. You gave such a depiction of terror as I had never seen before and have never seen since."

"Do you mean to say I was acting?" Mrs. Stevenson exclaimed.

"Yes," I insisted, "and acting splendidly because unconsciously. You felt every whit of the emotions you expressed and spontaneously employed every bit of your ability as an emotional actress in the unwitting achievement."

Kate Claxton did not need to be told why I spoke of this involuntary performance as having insured her an income for life. But the reader may like to know, too. By a chance she was the only member of the company at hand when the eager reporters got there. By another chance she was a fluent talker, made eloquent by excitement. Her rapid narrative of her flight from her dressing room through a cellar to the street was sent to our morning journals in New York and thence telegraphed all over the land. Not until afternoon was any other player's talk published. By that time Kate Claxton had gained more publicity in the reading matter of the press than $1,000,000 would have bought in the advertising columns. After twenty-nine years she is still making tours in "The Two Orphans."

About the revival of this old play? Well, one fact is made clear. The longevity is not due to Kate Claxton's good advertising luck, although that has helped; nor to the impetus given at the outset by a cast of suitably gifted actors, although that helped, too; but to Adolph D'Ennery, the French author, a master craftsman in melodramatic work. Two foster sisters are abducted upon their arrival in Paris, one by an aristocratic libertine, and the other by a bestial beldame with a lustful son. Not until the end of a long play do they get together in happy safety. In the meantime their virtues had had pitiful and perilous encounters with vice. Their stories are carried along separately in the action, while a third concerning a proud family's secret gives a background for the two others; yet there is never in all the shifting of episodic scenes a minute of confusion in plot or lapse in interest. The seven sections, if you will remember, closed with situations which are not forced, yet are very strong—to make you wipe your eyes for the maidens, clench your fists for their enemies and clap your hands for their friends.

D'Ennery had a favorite trick of laming, blinding and deforming the sufferers in his fiction for the stage, and he made a double play for sympathy with it when he associated the sightless Louise and the crippled Pierre. They won out with the new Broadway audience on Monday night as they had in Union Square in 1874. The press in dramatic art has been considerable in the intervening twenty-nine years and a quarter. No one who writes nowadays other than crudely for the rabble dares to let his characters tell their motives and intentions in soliloquies, but nearly all of D'Ennery's last act is made up of such direct explanations to the audience. But in every other respect this work remains, in my judgment, the best model in its class.

A play which authors like to cite as proof that American managers don't know good matter when they read it, is this same one of "The Two Orphans." Hart Jackson saw it acted in Paris, bought the right for this country on credit at $750, made a translation in which he judiciously, but clumsily, lopped off an act, offered it in vain to all our producers of that day and at length, just before his option expired, persuaded A. M. Palmer to take it at an advance on the low purchase price. The weather was blizzard cold and stormy during the first three days of its presentation here, and the audiences were small and rather chilly. The feeling of the critics seemed to be that a Bowery melodrama had been misplaced in Broadway. A less virile, but calmer, piece made ready in haste for rehearsal. But the sky soon cleared over the venture and the sun of prosperity shone on it. But D'Ennery added only the $750 to his wealth, and Jackson got for his tinkering nothing else than employment by Palmer as a secretary. In these times the royalty would amount to $20,000 or more in a single season. Palmer made a fortune, to lose in later ventures. Kate Claxton became a star actress and purchased the Jackson version, for which she is receiving pay during the present revival.

The reproduction of "The Two Orphans" with nine stars in the cast made the theatrical occasion of the week. No one of them had been a shiner of the highest-known resplendence, and several had no more than gleamed flitfully. Yet Kyrle Bellew, James O'Neill, Charles Warner, E. M. Holland, Margaret Illington, Grace George, Annie Irish, Elita Proctor Otis and Clara Morris were a remarkable assemblage. I shall not go into any particulars of comparison. Opinions are bound to differ, and mine would not be the convincing one among the many. Merely as a record I will set it down that, in the order I have named them, they have the roles taken originally by Charles R. Thorne, Frank F. Mackay, McKee Rankin, Stuart Robson, Kitty Blanchard Rankin, Kate Claxton, Fanny Morant, Marie Wilkins and Ida Vernon. If the list arouses no memories of your own, as probably it does not, you may be content with my estimate that the new performance is better than the old one in some places, poorer in others and quite equal in the general average. James O'Neill is mentionable further as the nearest to a survivor of the original company. He followed Mackay as the cripple in the second season.

And there's Clara Morris—good old Clara Morris! Next to Palmer in the reminiscent affection of the Monday audience—which gave two protracted spells of applause to him—she was honored above any and all of the participants in the memorable show. She was a sad sight in lost comeliness, her voice of former persuasive melody clackled and wheezed and the five-minute part of Sister Genevieve seemed to tax all that remained of her once wondrous emotional power. Nevertheless, she proved herself still an actress personally and instinctively, before she began to act professionally in the single incident of the nun's brief role, the holy woman's first lie to save an innocent girl from exile as an outcast. Some of the people fired a premature volley of welcome at a no-account nun who was on the scene when the curtain lifted, mistaking a young actress, much to her confusion, for the famous genius who had not been on a Broadway stage in fifteen years. That blunder seemed to increase the strength and length of the demonstration when the Morris herself made her entrance a minute afterward. It was no wonder that her eyes filled with tears, her hands trembled and her feet faltered. Beyond a doubt she was deeply moved by proof so affectionately positive that, for old acquaintance not forgot and the days auld lang syne, the laurels of the night were given to her.

Nor was it any more to be doubted that Clara Morris, the woman, wasn't for an instant separated from Clara Morris, the actress. The woman, if left to herself under the circumstances, might have overflowed her eyes with tears, clasped her hands in a vain effort to hold them still and wabbled on her feet in faintness, but there would not have been any dramatic activity in her disclosure of real emotion. How different was the actress who dominated the woman! She stretched out her arms as though beseeching the people to cease their applause, she lifted her outspread palms to heaven as though in prayer for a blessing on them and finally, after nearly doubling herself to the ground in a grateful bow, turned and retreated up stage as though unable longer to face her triumph. Clara Morris in her memoirs describes herself as having been perfectly self-possessed under any stage ordeal. Her former companions tell many corroborative stories of her unbroken composure under all tests of prearranged acting or unforseen accident. So her behavior on Monday night was interesting phenomena.

The fineness of that avowedly fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous was, perhaps, never more keenly felt than when Henrik Ibsen's tragedy of "Rosmersholm" was acted for the first time in this country and escaped open guying only by the timely intervention of the asbestos curtain and general opening of exits to Broadway. Five minutes more and the audience would have ceased to suppress and given free vent to its appreciation of absurdity. Considering that imminent possibility of unseemly levity, it is undoubtedly as well that Mr. Rosenfeld had seen fit to cut the Ibsen drama freely. "Ghosts," for instance, or "A Doll's House" could not be comic. Badly done, they might be, and not infrequently have been extremely dull. But they are real. In his later work, of which "Rosmersholm" is an admired example, and his last play, "When We Dead Awaken," the most extreme, Dr. Ibsen has deserted the realistic for the symbolic with increasing enthusiasm. And it is in symbolism that the fine sublime-ridiculous line is finest. "Rosmersholm" is a study in the impracticability of ideals, and is exposed in the midst of and, to an extent, by means of, an ancestral gloom centered upon the home and family of the Norwegian Rosmers—a pall-like cloud dread similar to that enveloping the Poe house of Usher. But dread has a pretty uphill time of it in a glare of light suggestive of Chicago's State street or a Rogers brothers' third act; and the voice of the prompter doesn't cause that mystic thrill that the voice of an unseen soul is generally credited with creating. In fact, in as much as the Century players seem to require a century in which to learn their lines, they might have selected an Ibsen realistic rather than symbolic play, that arouses a natural confusion as to whether the frequently audible prompter is or is not one of the ghostly "white horses of Rosmersholm" become chatty.

Now, I don't want to be understood as prejudiced against Mr. Rosenfeld's scheme, nor as endeavoring to prejudice other against it. A prospectus promising five productions—Shakespeare, Ibsen, Sudermann, Sheridan and a new American drama as a fifth—is too worthy an undertaking to merit other than the sincerest encouragement. But intention is one thing and realization, alas, another. Six weeks ago "Rosmersholm" was announced as the second of the Century Players' revivals, and in that time they did not learn their lines. Only one "Centurian" knew enough language to go on with, and the others, when not repeating what the audience had just heard the prompter speak, were stumbling along, reaching for words and, of course, so occupied with mere memory that acting, even in its most all-embracing sense, was not attempted. In the audience I saw a man and a woman who, as leading members in cut-rate stock companies, have not only learned a part a week, while giving two performances a day, but interpreted each role in an intelligent, forceful, if not always polished, manner.

George Grossmith, in his satirical monologues, used to give a "typical Ibsen play," in which two creatures, incidentally diseased, concluded that the only thing left to do was to commit suicide. Thereupon they endeavored to find a date on which both were free from other social engagements, and finally set the happy day for "Tuesday week." To folk frivolously inclined the performance at the Princess was almost as funny. The conclusion reached, the desirability of suicide to a life without ideals, and exemplified in the departure of Rosmer and the woman, hand in hand, to a suicidal bridge to fling themselves in a mill run, "to happiness! to happiness!" perches on that fine idea mentioned, and the prompter's wafted words were enough to blow it over.

A VERY FISHY LOVE STORY

"IT WAS a hot August day," said the judge, leaning back in his desk chair and looking out the window, where the thick snow was pelting down. "Uncle Jimmy and I and Murphy, the guide, were out casting for bass along the east shore of Virgin lake. You remember the place? There where the bank runs up forty feet high, with a lot of jack pines on the top and old 'Wappy's' cabin in the middle of them? Close to the shore there are a lot of tall green bulrushes, with some big windfalls hanging down among 'em. It's lovely water for bass.

"When we started out that morning it looked like rain, and 'Murph' and I took our slickers along with us. 'Murph' said it was sure to rain before night, but Uncle Jimmy knew better. He wasn't going to be troubled lugging a lot of slickers across the portages, he said.

"Until after noon it was broiling hot and we got nary a strike from a bass. Uncle Jimmy got a few little 'snakes' and I nabbed a couple of pike, but the black bass were not biting at all. About 2 o'clock it commenced to sprinkle and about the same time the black bass began to go after our frogs. The rain got heavier and so did the bass. 'Murph' and I put on our slickers and Uncle Jimmy sat there and got soaked, but he was pretty game. Inside of an hour we had got twenty bass among us and the rain was just oozing out of Uncle Jimmy.

"'Say,' he said, finally, 'when are you fellows going in? I'm getting tired.'

"'Going in?' said I, with a snort. 'Going in? With the bass biting like this! Why, we ain't going in till it gets too dark to cast.'

"The fish that were rising to our frogs were all small mouths, and not one of them weighed less than two pounds. I had one four-pounder and a couple more about as big. It was one of the days a fisherman dreams of. Uncle Jimmy was having his share of the luck, but he did look mighty moist and uncomfortable.

"There was a nice little breeze coming out of the west with the rain. 'The wind from the west, it is the best,' you know. It was just enough to blow us along at the proper gait for casting and keep us out at the proper distance from the lily pads and rushes. Then, when we got to the end of the casting ground, 'Murph' would row out and back again to the beginning of the weed beds.

"By 5 o'clock, for once in my life, I had got almost enough of bass fishing. My arm ached from casting and my reel hand had half a dozen good blisters on it. We were all getting pretty careless, fooling with our fish after we had hooked them and letting them take all kinds of liberties with us.

"Finally I hooked a good three-pounder and, after a hot fight, finally pulled him up to within ten feet of the boat. I was dragging the fish along on the top of the water when 'Murph,' the guide, called out, in an excited whisper, 'Say, look at that other bass a-follerin' along.'

"We looked, and there, right beside the fish that was hooked, was another bass a little larger, swimming along with its nose almost touching the head of the cuss on the spoon. I tell you it liked mighty peculiar.

"'What's that mean?' asked Uncle Jimmy.

"'I ain't sure,' says 'Murph,' 'whether you've hooked a lady bass and that's her husband coming along to try and help the old lady out of her scrape, or whether that big fellow behind is the maw or paw of the fellow that took your frog. I've seen a thing like that happen just once before, and some folks holds one idea and some the other. For all I know the fish on the hook may be a young lady bass and the big one her beau. Pull in closer to the boat and maybe we can tell more about it.'

"I reels in almost all my line and gets the fish within six feet of the boat. Still the big fellow followed right along. Every now and then he'd swim right up close to the fish on the hook and rub his nose against its nose. Then he'd swim alongside of it and seem to caress it with its fins.

"'Say,' says 'Murph,' 'ain't that the most loving expression you ever seen on a fish's face?'

"And not a blamed one of us laughs!

"Finally Uncle Jimmy starts out to try to catch that free bass. He throws in a nice green frog, just the right size and as lively as a cricket. The frog lands within two inches of the big bass's nose, and the way it kicked and swum along through the water must have been most appetizing to a fish, but that bass never paid the slightest attention to it. Uncle Jimmy lets his frog drift back until it brushes the bass in the nose with its hind legs, and then the fish simply pushed it aside and came swimming along beside its captured mate. He fooled along four or five minutes trying to interest the bass in frog legs, but never succeeded at all. Then he reels in, takes off the frog, and puts on a phantom minnow. It was a brand new phantom, green and silver, with darker fins and a mighty pretty bait, but it didn't work any better than the frog. The big bass would have nothing to do with it.

"Every now and then I'd give the bass on my line a jerk through the water, and every time the big fellow would start up like a flash and follow it. My fish was hooked lightly in the upper jaw and there was a piece of pork rind which I was using for bait sticking out of one side of its mouth. As I watched the two fish coming along through the water, I suddenly saw that the big fellow had also noticed that pork rind. He swam up close to his mate and made a savage clip at the projecting pork rind with his jaws. He caught it, too, and then proceeded to shoot around and throw himself almost out of the water.

"'B'gosh! You've got 'em both hooked,' yelled 'Murph.'

"I thought I had, too, and started to reel hard, but just as 'Murph' was reaching for the pair of them with his landing net the big chap shook the piece of pork out of his mouth and lay off a couple of feet, still within six feet of the boat, and watching us with both eyes. All this time, you know, they were both on the top of the water.

"'Try him with a piece of pork rind,' I called to Uncle Jimmy. 'That's what he seems to like.'

"Uncle Jimmy put a nice brown piece of pork, with a white belly, on his spoon and let it drop almost into the jaws of the big bass. But he never even smelt of it.

"'B'gosh!' said 'Murph,' 'that big feller was just trying to get his wife loose when he took your bait.'

"And it certainly did look that way. Uncle Jimmy is a nice, gentle, tender-hearted little man, and he was beginning to be touched by this example of love's devotion.

"'Through the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps I'll pursue,
And shield thee, and save thee, or perish there, too.'

I caught him quoting, and there was something shiny in his eye.

"'Say, judge,' he said; 'let's let 'em go. It's too much like breaking up a happy home to suit me.'

"I was willing, for the devotion of that big bass, whether it was maternal or uxorious, was certainly extremely touching.

"'I'm going to let it go,' I says to 'Murph,' but he stopped me.

"'No use,' he says. 'That old girl on your hook has been dragging through the water too long. She's fair drowned by this time.'

"But I reeled her up to the boat and 'Murph' lifted her with the landing net. It was a female bass all right. Then we looked to see what had become of the big fellow. He had disappeared.

"'That's about where I saw him last,' I says, and makes a little cast with my empty spoon. It no sooner hit the water than up he come, boiling, and fairly swallowed the hook, spoon, and swivels, and all. Then I expected a great fight, but, Lord! that bass never even tried to get away. Why, he just come running right up to the side of the boat and sat there, on his haunches, as quiet as you please, waiting for 'Murph' to get busy with the landing net. We lifted him and he fell off the hook right beside his dead mate, and lay there without making a single flop. I shall always feel——"

Just then the listener rudely interrupted.

"I wonder, judge," he said, looking out of the window, "if it's going to snow all day?"

"I don't know, sir," snapped the judge, sharply. "What did you call to see me about, anyway?"—Chicago Tribune.